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SUBJECT: ZUZUL: NEW GOVERNMENT PUSHING AHEAD AS FAST AS IT CAN; TO REVIEW REQUEST FOR TROOPS TO PROTECT UN IN IRAQ

REF: STATE 69468

Classified By: Nicholas M. Hill, Polecon Counselor, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

1. (C) The new Croatian government is doing everything it can to keep its EU and NATO bids on track and forge better ties with the U.S. Foreign Minister Miomir Zuzul conveyed confidence in a dinner on April 1 with the Ambassador and EUR/SCE Director Chuck English. He said the Prime Minister's trip to Washington last week went "extremely" well. They were grateful for the President's supportive remarks at the NATO ceremony at the White House. The new HDZ-led government was cooperating with the War Crimes Tribunal "100 percent," and Carla del Ponte seemed to be very happy (septel). The government remained committed to deliver any indictees to The Hague that it could, including the five Bosnian Croats whose indictments the court just issued.

2. (C) The GOC spoke with one voice. PM Sanader was completely supportive of Washington's Iraq policy and would do what it could to play a role -- although the opposition in parliament limited its options. The Ambassador and English urged the government to contribute troops to the new protection force for the UN presence in Iraq (ref). Zuzul said he would take the matter up with the prime minister (see para 5). Zuzul was confident the government would meet its commitments to Croatia's Serbian community on property and refugee issues. End summary.

3. (C) In a wide-ranging discussion over dinner April 1, Foreign Minister Zuzul told the Ambassador and visiting EUR/SCE Director Chuck English that the prime minister's visit to the U.S. went extremely well. PM Sanader was delighted with the remarks of the President at the White House Accession ceremony for the seven newest NATO members and three aspirants, including Croatia, Macedonia and Albania. The president had more words of encouragement for the aspirants than for the new members, Zuzul, who accompanied the PM, said. The prime minister was delighted in a pull aside with the President to hear praise for Sanader's position on the Iraq war and terrorism. While SecDef Rumsfeld was unable to meet separately with Sanader, the PM had three separate encounters with Rumsfeld and was pleased with the words of encouragement.

4. (C) Zuzul said that the GOC's commitment to getting into NATO as fast as possible remained firm, although interest in Alliance membership generally had declined in Croatia. The government looked forward to the visit of NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer sometime in May. In addition to meetings, Scheffer will speak to the Parliament. Zuzul noted that, according to one poll, the public's support for NATO was down from the upper sixties a few years ago to the low fifties now. The Foreign Minister said that President Mesic and some of his key advisors were at best ambivalent about membership. The president is facing elections next winter and is not likely to push Alliance membership prominently in his election plank. "It's not popular to talk about NATO in Croatia right now."

Troops/Assistance to Iraq?

5. (C) Zuzul said that Croatians seem to connect NATO membership with the more controversial matter of sending troops to Iraq. The GOC wants to play a helpful role, but right now sending troops was extremely unpopular. Zuzul said that while in Washington he talked to experts at Walter Reed hospital; the GOC was considering offering medical assistance. Zuzul had in mind making Croatian pediatric facilities available to Iraqi children -- if children could be transported to Zagreb for care. Passing points (ref), the Ambassador and SCE Director English pressed Zuzul to consider contributing troops to a contingent charged with protecting what will be a large-size UN mission in Baghdad after the transfer of sovereignty in June. Zuzul said he was "personally" disposed to the idea, but securing enough support would be problematic. He will consult with the prime minister. Zuzul noted that fear of terrorist reprisals was a problem in Croatia -- the president himself, whose support

would be critical to deliver troops to Iraq, has talked about the terrorist threat a number of times, both to the public and in private meetings with the government.

#### ICTY Cooperation

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16. (C) Zuzul stressed that the GOC was doing everything it could to cooperate with the War Crimes Tribunal. "We're cooperating 100 percent, not 90 percent." He said he was on

the phone with Carla del Ponte and the ICTY Liaison Office in Zagreb constantly. Del Ponte told Justice Minister Skare-Ozbolt this week that the government's efforts "exceeded" her expectations. Zuzul underscored that the GOC objects to some of the recent indictments that have arrived from The Hague -- which characterize aspects of the Homeland War as a "joint criminal enterprise" -- but would cooperate regardless. The government has helped to deliver two indictees already, Ivan Cermak and Mladen Markac, and has consulted with the most recent group of indictees -- including Croatian Defense Council (HVO) Military Police Chief, Valentin Coric -- and they would go to The Hague on April 5. Zuzul said that this effort was not easy politically, but the government had "no choice."

17. (C) The Ambassador and SCE Director pressed Zuzul hard on the need to track down ICTY fugitive Ante Gotovina. Authorities must demonstrate that they have "turned over every stone" in their efforts to apprehend him, English said. Getting Gotovina remained an essential priority in Washington and the government must deploy all viable means to find him -- and demonstrate as much to the Tribunal. Zuzul countered that the government was doing everything it could and would continue to do everything it could -- but it was difficult to prove a negative. "Nobody would be happier than we if Gotovina turned up in The Hague, but I'm not optimistic."

#### Refugees

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18. (C) Zuzul said he was much more optimistic that the government would enjoy success on its promises concerning facilitating the return of ethnic Serb refugees. PM Sanader was in constant touch with the Serb members of Parliament -- who are unofficial coalition partners of HDZ -- and would fulfill commitments made at the beginning of the HDZ-led government's mandate. Issues associated with return of refugees, including property restitution, were vexing, Zuzul continued, but unlike with Gotovina, the government has more control over the situation and would be able to deliver. English noted that much was riding on how well Croatia's creaky justice sector performed -- a point stressed by our OSCE interlocutors in Zagreb. (Croatian courts suffer from enormous backlogs, and police have been slow to follow through on evictions in behalf of ethnic Serb property owners.) Zuzul was undeterred. The government has much more control over this issue than over finding Gotovina.

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